

Imagining Business

An Interdisciplinary Exhibition

Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Imagining Business* at Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, 6–28 June 2008. The exhibition accompanied the first workshop on *Imagining Business: Reflecting on the Visual Power of Management, Organising and Governing Practices* held at Saïd Business School on 26–27 June 2008.

Workshop organising committee

Paolo Quattrone, François-Régis Puyou and Christine McLean.

Catalogue

Edited by Alex Hodby, Lucy Kimbell and Nina Wakeford.

Texts by Paolo Quattrone, François-Régis Puyou and Christine McLean and Jon Wood.

Conversation led by Noortje Marres.

Imagining Business

Alex Hodby, Lucy Kimbell and Nina Wakeford

This is a form of public experiment. Organised to accompany the first workshop on *Imagining Business: Reflecting on the Visual Power of Management, Organising and Governing Practices*, the exhibition provides another way to explore the complexities of visuality in organisations, as well as the specific and local activity of visualisation.

A series of questions animate both the exhibition and the workshop. How do visualisations constitute organisations? How might our understanding of business change if we thought of the artefacts of business as themselves performing? Do we need to develop dedicated theoretical orientations towards the power of the visual as enacted in day-to-day organisational life? What are the potentials for the artefact, whether diagram, object or some other form entirely, to disrupt the normative ways in which business operates?

The exhibition is therefore propositional, but also provocative. It brings together three orientations towards imagining and the visual. Works by Chris Evans and Carey Young from the world of visual art illustrate how contemporary artists are involved in rethinking business. The commodification of art has historically created forms of oppositional art practice. However, these artists both find ways to adopt and operate within corporate modes, avoiding any straightforward mimicry. Yet their work highlights the extent to which performing goes on in ordinary business activity, how dependent it is on not just visuality, but also on enrolling people in institutional and entrepreneurial narratives.

In a move which might appear to stage a tense stand-off, the works of Evans and Young co-exist in the very concrete space of the business school with the products of business visualisation itself, re-introduced as exhibits by designers from branding consultants Wolff Olins, and live|work, a service design and innovation consultancy. The mission of both these companies is not only to help their clients create or enhance brands, products and services, but also to develop new practices of branding and service design. Both offer the 'stuff' of this work, giving some insight into their creative processes. At the same time the absences and gaps show what *cannot* be made public when clients think any visualisations are risky, and are conceived of as leaky artefacts which might give away too much to a competitor.

The other works in the exhibition could be thought of as interdisciplinary, or at least referencing an interdisciplinarity brought forth through the recent interest of Science and Technology Studies (STS) in different modes of

knowing and doing. This is not so much about knowledge transfer or illustration, although the risks of being incorporated in these discourses are ever present. Rather, these pieces can be read as challenges to conventional modes of academic enquiry which are dominant, even in the highly reflexive field of STS. The works by Lucy Kimbell and Nina Wakeford can be placed in a genealogy of exhibitions which include *Making Things Public* at ZKM, Karlsruhe, in 2005. *Imagining Business* is both a more modest and more unstable proposition. It is not contained within the safety of a gallery. The pieces are likely to be unevenly noticed during the month of the show. Some might attract attention as 'art' to be read against work by Michael Craig-Martin and Langlands and Bell, for example, situated around the business school. Others might be seen as 'mere' promotion or part of a recruitment campaign directed at MBA students.

Giving a conference paper is a routine part of academic life. Designing an installation or creating a performance is not. One of the questions which emerges is how far the exhibition can explore the themes of the *Imagining Business* workshop without been seen as illustrative or a decorative distraction. The strains between potentially conflicting readings of the exhibition are maintained within this catalogue, which includes not only images of all the pieces shown, but glimpses into conversations which emerge from divergent perspectives. Paolo Quattrone, Christine McLean and François-Régis Puyou reflect on the importance of visualisations in organising. Jon Wood discusses the way contemporary art practices re-imagine institutions and organisations. Noortje Marres, in conversation with Lucy Kimbell and Nina Wakeford, questions the nature of the exhibition as an experiment from the viewpoint of STS.

As well as a public experiment, this exhibition might be seen as some kind of prototype. By having an exhibition to run alongside an academic workshop, and involving some of those artists and designers as traditional paper-givers as well as exhibitors, we try to avoid the false dualism between 'theory' and 'practice', and acknowledge the criticality and reflexivity in some art and design practices. We are grateful to the exhibitors for helping us to expand this area of enquiry at the very centre of its academic and practical definition, and hope this is the beginning of a longer conversation.

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Exhibition organised by Alex Hodby (platform projects), Lucy Kimbell (Clark Fellow in Design Leadership, SBS) and Nina Wakeford (ESRC Fellow, Goldsmiths).

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